

The Iowa Review

A Song of Innocence

Author(s): Ralph Ellison

Source: *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring, 1970), pp. 30-40

Published by: [University of Iowa](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20157573>

Accessed: 16/06/2014 13:10

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Iowa is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Iowa Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

A Song of Innocence

Ralph Ellison

—Excerpt from a novel in progress

Mr. McIntyre was standing there and I didn't recognize him, and then it started happening. I thought one of my bad spells was coming on, the words were coming out of me so fast that while I could hear them inside me I couldn't connect up with them. It was like in the night when you're in bed and somebody walking along in the middle of the street in the dark lets out one of those ole long, slow-winding whoops that's neither a word or a song—you know. . . . And you hear it come sailing over the houses and the trees and on until it's starting to die away like a train's whistle when it's moving way yonder, out in the west, and then somebody else hears it falling away in a far street and he lets out a whoop because he can't help but keep it going and you hear it floating back out of the shadows and the dark while you lie there listening to both of them walking and listening and whooping and whooping and walking and listening with neither one knowing what those whoops are saying or who they're saying it to. But you know that they've got to be saying *something* because all that lonesome rising and falling of sound like singing has you by the short hair and dragging you out *into the ole calcified night of loneliness toward the unsayable meaning of mankind's outrageous condition in this world* (See, there they go again! Pay them no mind, Mr. McIntyre, they on their own. I try, I try awfully hard but they won't behave). . . .

So I roll over on the pallet and listen to those whoops rising and falling and dying and you try to understand what they're saying and even though you will never in this world quite make it before sleep comes down, you know just the same that it means beyond anything the straight words could ever say. You're here and they're there and there and you're still here and they're moving on and the sound and the meaning's passing out there back and forth in the night. So you fall asleep and the sound falls off the soft edge of your mind into the depths of all you can't hold or understand, or see or be, and they keep walking

and whooping as though you'd never been born or had no ears to hear. (Have some lemonade, Mr. McIntyre.)

Listen: So when he had walked in here I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't control those words and he was standing on the steps by now so that I couldn't get up and struggle down to where I could hear the freight trains making up down in the yards. I get up in the night sometimes and watch them just like I used to do when he was living here and was always with me in case I had a spell and fell and hurt myself, and I stand there on the hill back of the house and look down through the dark at the light and smell the good clean smell of the steam as it comes purling from the engine and there's red coals glowing in its grate and it's standing there huge in the dark, looking just like it's breathing and waiting to take off to all those places I always wanted to see but never could, and I can feel the words moiling up inside me and I want to go along with it. Sometimes I come to the very edge of a spell too, but never over it when I'm standing there looking. So, yes indeed, I want to go, with it big and black and full of fire and steam and just rolling all over the land through the daylight and the dark on those shining rails. It's a dream without rhyme or reason, but just the same, I could go along sitting right up there behind that smokestack where I could look all around and see over the hills and through the towns like it was the daddy and I was the baby riding high on his shoulders. Sure, this said so my soul sighs and what's your silly dream, Mr. McIntyre? A one-eyed man in this town stole an elephant once when Severen was a boy, and hid him in a patch of trees and was trying to feed him on yard grass, and he's one my words didn't make up.

Anyway, Severen knew though I was sitting here ignorant of his coming. He knew all about me and the trains even way back there, and once he drew me a tablet full of engines and colored them with crayons, because he knew how the trains eased me. In fact he was the first to understand what they did for me. He used to go with me to watch the trains and after he went away Miss Janey took me to watch whenever she had the time. She used to say, "Cliofofus, you really must have been born with a truly aching heart to need a whole big engine and line of cars to soothe your agitation."

Miss Janey's right, though; those trains ease me. —Eeeeeease me! What I mean is, they ease my aching mind. When I watch those engines and boxcars and gondolas I start to moving up and down in my body's joy and when I see those drivers start to roll, all those words go jumping out to them like the swine in the Bible that leaped off the cliff into the sea—only they hop on the Katy, the Rock Island and the Santa Fe. . . . Space, time and distance, like they say, I'm a yearning man who has to sit still. Maybe those trains need those words to help them find their way across this here wide land in the dark, I don't know. But for me it's like casting bread on the water because not only am I eased in my restless mind, but once in a while, deep in the night, when everything is quiet and all those voices and words are resting and all those things that I've been tumbling and running and bouncing through my mind all day have got quiet as a ship in a bottle on a shelf, then I can hear those train whistles talking to me, just to me, and in those times I know I have all in this world I'll ever need—mama and papa and jelly-roll. . . .

So there Severen was and I couldn't do anything about those words—which is what makes me *me*. They say that folks misuse words, but I see it the other way around, words misuse people. Usually when you think you're saying what you mean you're really saying what the words want you to say. It's just like a drunk piano player I know who says that when he's drinking he plays where his fingers take him. Well, once upon a time they took him straight into the biggest church in town and got him thrown into jail for playing "Funky Butt" on the godbox, which is Mr. Fats Waller's name for the pipe organ. One never knows, *do* one, as he used to say. *Vox Humana, vox excelsis*. . . . Mr. McIntyre. But words are tricky, they keep a thumb stuck in their noses and wave their fingers at you all the time, because they know that a sign or a gesture is the only thing you can control because no matter what you try to do, words can never mean meaning. Now you just wave your hand at somebody and it means bye-bye. Throw a kiss or hold out your arms and even a baby can understand you. But just try to say it in words and you raise up Babel and the grapes of wrath. If you nod your head and smile even folks who don't speak your language will get the idea, but you just whisper *peace* somebody will claim you declared war and will insist on trying to kill you. No wonder we have war! No wonder history is a bitch on wheels with wings traveling inside a submarine. Words are behind it all.

And with me it's even worse because since I can't always control my body even my gestures make me out a fool. Like the time the teacher said, *Cliofus, who was the father of our country?*

This was the first grade, even though the desk was already so small my knees stuck out in the aisles and my head was high enough to make the best target in the class.

Who was the daddy of our country? she said.

I don't know, mam, I told her.

You don't know? Then think a bit, she said.

So I thought a while with all the others watching and then I tried to guess. I said, Is it Him who art in heaven?

She grinned then, then she tried to hide it, but those outlaws like Buster, and Leroy, and Tommy Dee started to laughing and banging on their desks and jeering at me, saying,

Cliofus is a dummy! Cliofus is a *pure* fool!

And the teacher looked at me real disgusted.

Quiet, she said, Quiet! And she started to frowning so hard it confused me. I wasn't very sociable in those days even though Miss Janey had tried to teach me my manners long before they decided to let me go to school.

Cliofus, the teacher said. You must know history, she said. Just like that.

And I said, Yes, mam . . .

But because I thought she was talking about *Mister* History, who was the father of our country I told her, "I be pleased to meet him, mam" . . . and I knew even before the words got out that I was wrong because Buster was already saying,

Listen to ole Seeofus, y'all. He a *bad* granny-dodger this morning!

I heard him plain as day, but I was losing ground to those words so fast I was already saying,

But do you think Mr. History would have time to be bothered with somebody like me, mam?—Not because I was sassy, you understand, but because I already felt despised and so unnecessary. Folks were already calling me a fool and in those days I didn't know whether I was or wasn't or even just what kind of a fool I was. I just figured I was pretty lucky that they let me go to school even though they waited so long to do it. So you see, the words had betrayed me twice over, and those fiends were really laughing at me now. It was like it was springtime recess near the last day of school and they'd already broken out most of the window-lights. So when the teacher slammed a book on the desk and said,

Boy, what do you mean, all I could do was stutter and shake, because I didn't know what the words would do next. Then the pains burst in the back of my head and everything around me started rushing away like a fast freight leaving a tramp and right in the middle of it I heard a voice just like mine saying, Why shucks, Miss Kindly, I'm plumb full of history; even the dogs know that.

And for a second there I thought it was the words playing a mean new trick on me, but it was Jack. He was throwing his voice from the back of the room and that set those howling heathens off again. Buster jumped out into the aisle and did a buck dance, singing,

Well, if at first you don't succeed
Well a-keep on a-sucking
Till you do sucka seed

and the rest joined in yelling:

Clofus ripped it, he ripped it, he ripped it, he
really ripped it
like a fool!

And before the teacher could say a word, Tyree jumped on top of his desk and spread out his arms like a Calhoun or a Cicero and yelled,

Friends, Romans and Country women, Clofus
is an ape-sweat with too much mustard on his
bun!

And he frowned and slammed his fist down hard on his desk (Bang!) and shook his cheeks like a bad bull dog.

That really started them to yelling and holding their noses and saying *Phew!* and *He aint on my mama's table* and things like that even though an ape-sweat was what they used to call a hamburger when they didn't want anybody to beg for a bite.

Tell us some more, they said, and ole Tyree flapped his arms like a rooster and strutted around in a circle pecking with his head and said, Brothers and sisters and grand-mammy-dodgers, Clofus is a soft horse-apple and a ripe goose egg!

That started them off again, yelling, Yaaaay! *He ripped it, he ripped it, he ripped it!* Clofus really ripped it like a fool! Then somebody hit the blackboard with a biscuit soaked in molasses and a baked yam sailed 'past my head and

squashed all over the big map of the United States that hung up front on a stand. But Miss Kindly was looking straight at me. The woman didn't even dodge!

Young man, you march right up here and apologize to me and to the rest of the class, she said.

But before I could move Jack spoke up in his natural voice, which he had already made as rough and deep as Mister Louis Armstrong's.

Said: Why, Miss Kindly, what do you mean apologize? All Clifus means is that he's fulla brown and that's a natural fact. You don't believe him, sniff him. . . .

They exploded then and even those good little girls, whose mama wrapped their braids in gingham rags, joined in. Started shooting off cap pistols, rolling in the aisles and throwing erasers at my head.

You a good boy but you got no brakes or steering wheel, have you Cli, Jack said, and I felt something slimy hit the back of my head and run down my neck. And when I turned to look, a bunch of grapes hit me square in the face. They really had my range that morning. Jack had swiped a whole crate of overripe grapes from the produce house and passed them around to the other outlaws. When I tried to stand everybody seemed to be hitting me with those grapes. You could just see my white sweater turning purple beneath your eyes, just like somebody was stirring it in a tub of Concords and that started me to getting sick. I dearly loved that sweater because Miss Janey knitted it for me and I could feel a spell coming down and Miss Kindly's banging on her desk didn't help me fight it off. I would rather have died than have a spell hit me in front of those fools but when I held up my hand to be excused my doggone fingers wouldn't open. It looked like I was shaking my fist at the world and Miss Kindly turned a gallish green and her eyes started to pop and it was getting dark and I could feel myself falling. Then I was in the aisle and it was turning from black to red in my eyes and all I could hear, back there in the fire and gas where I had gone was Miss Kindly yelling ORDER!

Which she didn't get because by the time Miss Janey drove the mule and the wagon over to get me they had poured ink in my ear and painted my face white with eraser chalk. Miss Janey gave them hell—

But I was telling about Severen and it was almost the same. After all that time, he came through the gate and on up here on the porch with me rocking slow and watching him and batting at the flies round my rocking chair while I was thinking on the New Jerusalem, which is what Miss Janey likes to call this State—You know:

Give me my Bow of burning gold
Give me my Arrows of desire
Give me my Spear: O clouds unfold
Bring me my chariot of fire. . . .

which was dancing in my mind like gnats around the eyes of a sleeping dog, and Severen came on not saying a word and stopped right there beside that post and was looking at me when the *words* started to talk to him. It was as though he'd asked a question and they were out to answer before I had a chance to stop

them. They didn't need me anyway, they were in there waiting to get out and didn't even care how they got started. Because they had recognized him long before I did; smelled him or heard him coming from a long way off like dogs do. And I don't know who he is even after they get started, although I might have, just by his standing there looking pokerfaced and listening. Which should've told me that he was somebody who knew something about me because no stranger would look at me, sitting here weighing over 300 and talking break-neck as I have to talk. Oh I see me, Mr. McIntyre, do you see you? Because all things considered I got a built-in feed-back, if you know what I mean. The words take over but I listen and remember. Anyway, a stranger would've listened a minute and then backed down those steps and cut out. Wouldn't even'av said goodbye.

But he was just standing there, a young man in those fine clothes and definitely not an insurance collector or a Jehovah's Witness, because he's empty-handed and his eyes are asking instead of telling or demanding or working out a strategy to take advantage of a fool. Or trying to scare somebody to save his soul. In fact, he's looking at me like I'm normal even though those words were working up such a head of steam that I'm already stuttering—which should have warned me because from the very beginning until he went away he always treated me like I was just like anybody else. But I swear that apart from those words I didn't know him from Adam—or Lazarus, which is more like it, since Adam only had one time to die and Lazarus had him at least two. And as long as Severen had been gone from this town he might just as well been dead. The words knew though, and were going at him like a bunch of fools bursting out of a barbershop to watch a dogfight or to see the wind blowing a woman's skirt up over her head.

So when I hear them saying, *There was the big one in the union suit*, I just wanted to forget it and get up right then and there and go watch me some trains.

But he just looked at me with a funny light in his blue eyes and that blue tie he was wearing gave them a deeper color than my own eyes could have remembered even if I'd recognized him and he just stood there in his white suit looking at me and listening to the words come crowding out:

That's right, they said, *Jack who one time cried, Hey Lawdy Mama, in the moving picture show and almost caused a panic. Remember? As clear and present a danger as you ever could see. Beyond the faintest shadow of a shadow of a shadow of a doubt.*

He frowned then and I could see that he was thinking.

Jack, Beau Jack, the words said, *Boo Boo. You remember him. The big one. The burly one. The one they used to call ole Sacka Fat, ole Funky London, Mister Loud-fart-in-a-cyclone-with-a-derby-on. Ole Doggy Poppa? Boo-Boo Beau Jack, Weinstein's Bear? Talk about a bull in a china shop, Weinstein, who was supposed to be so smart, had him a bear working in his jewelry store but had to fire him. Jack wouldn't keep all those clocks running on time and then he brought a batch of cheap rings from the Five and Ten and gave them to some girls telling them he stole them from Weinstein's best stock. Had more green fingers feeling and fumbling around this town than there's Okies in California before they caught on . . . Dam' near ruined Weinstein for the high school graduation trade.*

So he looked at me and laughed at this and he said his first words:

I can't place him. . . . Where did Jack live?

Out in the heights, we said, and a very famous character in those times. The same one who threw his voice and wrecked the class. Had a sweet tenor voice and could sing like a bird when he wanted to but preferred to sound like Satchel-mouth with a bad cold. Once he took your marbles. Came storming across the schoolground yelling 'Snatch-grabs' and kicking up dust and unholy terror among the little kids, knocking people down and laughing at 'em fall. Made you so mad you just lay on the ground and howled. Jack Boo-Boo Beau Jack, he was stealing the Communion grape juice from seven churches and was drinking it with his henchmen for three straight years before they caught the fool. Said he was teaching 'em what wine was really for. Those were the olden days, before they hired those colored cops and brought some civilization to this town. You still can't place him?

Severin shook his head then and I said

Something must have happened to your memory.

It's been a long time, he said, but yours seems O.K. Go on.

And I said, it's not my recollection that counts, it's what I can't help but say.

Do you mean that you always tell the truth?

And I told him No, but the truth gets into it.

Then the words said, *Look: Remember the little childrun sitting in rows, stinking and snorting and sniggling and snotting, knotty-headed and hockey-pants and stealing bites out of their bags of lunch whenever the old-maid teacher's back went around or she dropped her weary eye? All small, all of y'all but Jack and me the biggest in the class. Miss Mable Kindly was her name. She used to talk real proper, rolling her rr's and her eyes and wore her hair done up in three big buns with the rats always peeping out the skimpy back. And as flat-chested as Miss Janey's best ironing board. Straight as a ram rod, man. Her corset stays stuck out round her narrow hips like umbrella spines in a strong mean April wind, and her powdered face was as grey as the blackboard behind her head. Swore all the kids were heathens and the cross she had to bear and Jack did all he could to prove she wasn't lying. Used to see her walking sedately down the street as though she was carrying a thin-shelled egg between her knees and he'd yell out 'Cherries are ripe! Cherries are ripe!' then whistle like a crazy robin red breast. Poor woman'd start pulling down on her dress and patting herself on the chest and back of the neck and marching in double-quick time, and dark as she was her face'd turn cherry red.*

You remember I said, Dust-Mop Mable, these big bad gals used to call her while they shagged their hot young nasties up and down the hall between classes, singing,

Oh Dust Mop Mable

She swears she would if she could

But she a-just aint able—Mable!

And there she was teaching arithmetic.

"What's the difference between a multiplier and a multiplican?" her question was.

And shame on her! We were sitting there innocent and bland behind our second grade desks when Jack, who was facing the class in a chair for punishment, fell back on his shoulders and slouched way forward like he was throwing a faint and flipped a big hickey-headed sour pickle from his fly and shook confusion into her very soul. Her eyes got big as if she'd seen the devil come straight from hell and then Jack threw the pickle at the electric light and it hit the fixture and skidded across the ceiling and she rocked around and started to sway then caught herself and hit that hall screaming rape and resurrection—No now, don't come asking me why, but 'rape and resurrection' just the same.

So then ole Jack fell off his chair from laughing and rolled on the floor like he was about to die, and here comes the principal, Dr. Peter Osgood Eliot, who usually looked no more human than a granite general astride a concrete horse but now his iron grey hair is standing up on end, his bowels are in a fair uproar, and his false teeth are rattling like a mixed-up telegraph. He started pointing at us all like his arm was a sabre and put the whole class under quarantine, accusing us all of flipping the pickle, singing "The Boy in The Boat," writing nasty language on the schoolhouse walls and saying "spit" that dirty word. Then he hurried out to call the law.

And right away in leaps Blue Goose with his well-stropped head dragging half a tree limb behind him got to whipping Jack's behind and all the boys in the first five rows—And most of us not even knowing what it was all about or even able to believe what our own dear eyes had seen. I tell you, Justice was deaf, dumb, blind and ball-headed that day, my weed.

Blue Goose is a name I remember, Severen said. And I stopped him right there.

Now you're highballing, I said. And I knew then that I had to get closer to what those words were digging up and stretching out but I didn't let on to him . . .

I said, Of course you remember. He used to knock on the classroom doors saying, Miss So-and-So, you have any boys you want me to beat—and wouldn't take no for an answer. Just started to choosing us like picking sides to play a game: You and you and you over yonder on the aisle—Get on your devilish feet and march! And he'd stand there trembling in his striped tan suit and his yellow shoes, his dusty brown derby and glaring at us all out of his snuff-colored eyes.

Yes! And if the teacher said, "But not him Reveren Samson, he's a good boy who makes all A's," Blue Goose would tell her, Is that right? Well I aim to keep him good and a little beating won't hurt his A's or B's one single bit! I don't aim to touch 'em.

So for no good reason we all marched down into the basement among the pipes and pisserines where went the snows of then, and lined up bottoms-up with lowered pants while Blue Goose laid on the strap—Strap hell! It was the thick solid rubber tire from the big wheel of a large tricycle that raised a welt like alligator hide! Dam' his soul, dam' his ball-headed soul to hell. Blue Goose, your nickname was our small revenge. Those fast, fleet-footed runners used to yell at him from under the viaduct when he rode his bicycle over and they'd honk at him, Blue Goose, from under the windows when he was preaching in his church but I could never move with enough control to even try it.

He whipped China Jackson that time and China ran down the tracks home and came racing back with his daddy's forty-four and shot at Blue Goose six straight times, raising up steady and leveling down slow and busting those caps like Jesse James—Wham! wham-wham-wham-Wham!—and missed the snuff-dipping bastard every time.

Because, you see, poor China was pulling the trigger when the barrel was pointing at twelve o'clock instead of three on account of seeing too many of those shoot-em-up cowboy movies. One o'clock would have drilled him another eye; four would have hit his spareribs or his chitterlings; nine o'clock or three would have called for his last clean shirt right then and there. But it wasn't in the cards, he choked on a fishbone one Fourth of July.

Just the same, when Blue Goose heard all that gunfire he took off honking bloody murder. In fact, he ripped his pants and swallowed his lipful of Garret's Snuff and busted the soles loose from his brogan shoes. And when he stopped running and found he was all in one piece he preached the Book of Revelations down on poor China's soul. What I mean is, Blue Goose put the badmouth on him.

Ah, but China boy, you're gone but your aim is there on the ceiling to mark your glory. Little snotnose kid up the street told me the other day that the Indians put all those bullet holes up there in the ceiling. I said if they did one had to be named Chief China Lee Jackson. I said to Severen, You remember things like that, because these young ones try to make up history as they go along. Or else they think all the lessons are in the book; all the lessons are about the times *they* been taught . . .

And Severen said, But what about the one in the union suit?

I said in the union station, you mean. Well, that was the time Miss Kindly marched the whole class over to the Santa Fe Crossing holding hands to see the whale. Remember, you held my hand and your mittens were pinned to your sleeves with safety pins and we passed under Case's golden eagle sitting on top of the world like he owned it and went past the ice cream factory and all those machine shops and through the smell of roasting coffee and baking bread and down there, in the bowels of town, surrounded by boxcars and factories we found the whale. It was laying up there on that long flatcar on planks and canvas painted blue and white to look like ocean waves, and him as big as three locomotives hooked end to end, as far from home as he ever could be and smelling sick-to-the-stomach sweetish like a whole ocean of embalming fluid. Miss Kindly made us gather round like we were about to sing *Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow*, while she strutted back and forth with her head cocked to one side, her finger pressed to her cheek and her eyes lit up and far away like Singapore.

See the great whale, chill-dreen, Miss Kindly said.

And we stood there straining our necks as though he was two miles in the air and flying like a bird.

See the Great whale, chill-dreen, Miss Kindly said. And we said,
Yes, mam, we sees him, mam, and stood there bugging out our eyes.

Remember he was roped all over with electricity wires and had two red

light bulbs sticking where his eyes were supposed to be, one on one side and the other way, way around on the other side, and with those harpoons trembling in his hump whenever a truck rolled past it looked like somebody had been sticking needles and thread into a black rubber mountain—But great God-a-mighty, wasn't that a fish! I mean wasn't that a *fish*!

Well, Miss Kindly looked at the whale and got real frisky.

See, chill-dreen, how the great whale is made of blubber, Miss Kindly said.

Yes, *mam*, we said. *Us sees all that blubber*.

And she arched her eyebrows and her hand fell over backwards in a limp-wristed curve then her lips puckered up like she was sucking a lemon or pulling tight the string on a tobacco sack.

The whale, chill-dreen, Miss Kindly said, *is an ani-mule. Do you understand?* (Miss Kindly was a fool for natural science, teacups and fancy manners especially for girls).

Yes, *mam*, Miss Kindly, we said all at once. *Whales is chilldreen is ani-mules is—mam?* *Ma-aam!*

Thus, chill-dreen, Miss Kindly said, *whale babies drink good rich milk. Isn't that truly wonderful*, Miss Kindly said.

Yes, *mam!* we said. *Good rich fish milk is good for you. Yes, mam.*

And now chill-dreen, Miss Kindly said, *would you like to ask any questions about the great big beautiful whale?*

So while we looked dumb and tried to think up some questions Miss Kindly made big eyes at the whale and turned around and sah-shayed back and forth with her eyebrows arched and walking as proper as the queen of Spain then all of a sudden she dropped her handkerchief on the cinders right in front of us and when a little girl dressed in apple green started to pick it up, Miss Kindly stamped her foot and her voice got high as a flute saying, "Nu nu nu nu nu!" and she stamped her foot again and froze that little girl like she'd been struck by the frost and a great big worm. Then she pointed at me, looking very grand, and said, Let *heeeem* pick it up. You are uh lay-di! And I stooped down to try it and fell flat on my face in the cinders and the heathens all snickered, but Miss Kindly was back picking on the poor whale again, talking about, *Well, I'm still waiting for your questions, chill-dreen. Use your imaginations.*

And that's when a little bowlegged, knock-kneed, pigeon-toed, mariney son-of-a-gun named Bernard said, Yes, *mam*, Miss Kindly I've got one.

And Miss Kindly said, Now that's very good, Bernard. That's how we learn chill-dreen, by asking questions. I'm surprised that with this great big wonderful whale brought all the way from the ocean for you to see you have so little to ask about this wonder of nature. Now you just listen to Bernard and learn from him. Bernard is *highly* intelligent. What is your question, Bernard?

And old Bernard asked it. He said, Miss Kindly, if that there whale is an animule, what gives rich milk, where do she carry her tits?

Miss Kindly lit up and turned a boxcar red, and lucky for old Bernard, that was when the door to the little house with the tall smokestack where the man who watched the crossing used to sit came open and out comes a little red-headed man smoking a crooked pipe and hobbling on an ole beat-up wooden leg

—who right away charged us all a nickel a piece just to listen to him lie. Said he caught that whale as easy as falling off a log or digging a crawdad out of a hole. Then he turned right around and swore that the whale bit off his leg. And Miss Kindly didn't say a word. So we watched him hobbling along lying a mile a minute from that whale's head to his tail and around and back again, telling us all about Jonah, whale oil, corset stays and bone hairpins. And then he showed us that big cud of ambergris that looked like something he'd fetched from the profoundest depth of the sea but which smelled like he should've left it right where it was.

That's when ole hoarse-voiced Tyree looked it over real close and wrinkled up his nose and whispered so everybody in half-a block could hear:

Lissen here, y'all, that *there* is whale hockey; I don't care *what* that white man says!

And here the man had just been telling us that the stuff was worth ten times its weight in gold and made the very best perfume.

Now isn't that amazing, child-reen, Miss Kindly said.

Yes, mam, we all said. We 'mazed. And the great big high-headed whale just lay there winking his bloodshot light-bulb eyes.

Now isn't that wonderful, Chill-reen, Miss Kindly said. See the great whale blinking his eyes. That proves he's an animule.

Yes mam, Miss Kindly, we all chimed in, we see him winking his animules.

He's animule.

He's a mule.

He's fish eyes.

He's an animaleyed fish, that's what he is.

And that's when the little man took him a chew of tobacco and ducked down under the flatcar and turned the valve. And the next thing we knew, a spout of water was shooting from the top of the great whale's head. And the little man yelled, "Thar she blows," and the whole class broke and ran for cover, but because of me you got all wet.

You remember that, I said, and Severen was laughing a real down home laugh. He took out a pack of cigarettes then and said, Clifus, do you smoke? And I told him no and he took one out and lit it and took a puff then laughed some more. And then he was kind of crying and I asked him why. And he said, "For the whale; for the poor old whale."
